

The Light at the End of the Tunnel by [nerdsarehot75](#)

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Summary:

After they rescue Will, Hopper begins to distance himself. Joyce gets mad.

The Light at the End of the Tunnel

Will was alive and safe, back home from the hospital, no worse for wear. Hopper knew this having been around to the house to see him. Each time he saw the Byers family it hurt a little more. He'd done everything he could to save him unable to face the prospect of one more innocent kid dying on his watch.

He hadn't planned on feeling this way. It had crept up on him in the quiet moments when he couldn't distract himself. Joyce's child survived and his didn't. Some days he wanted to punch something with the injustice of it all.

It had started off simply; feeling on the outskirts of this happy family, every smile shared between the mother and son a punch to the gut, happiness he couldn't begin to be a part of.

Will had tried. Hopper knew he looked up to him, as if he were a hero. He'd kept inviting him over for dinner and asking him for help with things. Joyce had smiled every time and he knew to her he was welcome company. Jonathan just wanted Will to be happy.

He'd started out so well, having dinner with them a couple of times a week, helping out with homework and doing odd jobs around the house on the weekend. It wasn't until he saw how the boys and Joyce were together that he began to feel like an outsider, an intrusion in their perfect family. He'd stopped coming after that.

His stomach hurt when he thought about Joyce. Partly it was guilt but mostly it was something he didn't want to name. At night he was plagued by images of her; wide eyed and scared, smiling at her son, crying when they found him, angry at him, sad whenever he declined her invitation.

Seeing Will and Joyce together reminded him of the early days with Sarah. It reminded him of how much he'd loved her and how much he'd lost. All he could think was the bright spark that had been snuffed out too early, not because he didn't fight for her but because there was nothing to be done in the end. He didn't like to think about it.

In the quiet moments he had he could still hear her laugh and see the beautiful blue of her eyes. She was the most perfect thing he'd ever done and he hadn't been able to save her. Life was cruel.

He'd begun drinking again, passing out on his couch and waking up not remembering the night before. Now he couldn't seek refuge in the

arms of a random woman because every time he did he saw Joyce and that wasn't something he was willing to deal with yet.

Why had she been able to save Will but he hadn't been able to save his Sarah? What had she done right that he hadn't? Why did she get all the happiness while he was left empty and alone?

He'd been seeing her everywhere lately. Any time he was not at home or the station she was there, always watching him with big, sad eyes. She was at the grocery store when he needed food, she was across the road from the pub, she was driving past him as he was going somewhere, usually home.

He always looked away from her, refusing to catch her eye. He'd hurry past, ignoring her if she called out to him. Once she'd caught his arm and he'd jerked it away from her and practically sprinted away.

He'd heard the gossip around. People had noticed their strained relationship. The going story was after Will had been rescued they'd slept together and he'd done his usual and left her without any intention of calling her again. Maybe that would be better than the truth. Then, at least, he would only be his usual level of douchebag and not this heightened one.

He was slouched on the sofa, can of beer in one hand, wallowing in self pity. He'd just arrived home from the pub, a six pack already waiting for him in the fridge, the only comfort he had these days. He was close to passing out, everything fuzzy around the edges.

A knock at the door startled him, causing him to fall off the sofa with a thud. Grumbling he stood up and meandered to the door. He didn't want an interruption and figured if he took a long time they'd probably leave. The knocking continued.

He opened the door and immediately reeled back. Joyce barrelled past him, fire in her eyes, barely acknowledging him. She kicked the left over beers from beside the couch, scattering them over the floor. She turned on him, taking the can from his hand and glaring at him.

"Give that back," he demanded.

"What the fuck, Hopper?" she yelled.

"Whats the matter?" he slurred, rubbing his eyes as if they were seeing things.

"Why they fuck have you been avoiding me?" she yelled, pushing him in the chest.

He turned and closed the door. He stumbled to the couch, falling onto it, automatically reaching for another can. She stood over him,

watching as he took a gulp from it. She took that beer too.

"I'm not leaving here without an answer," she told him.

"I didn't think you would," he mumbled. "Sit down."

She glared at him.

"Or not."

He lent his head in his hands, closing his eyes against her face. He couldn't bare to look at her. She'd burn his eyes out, as if her were the sun and he were some idiot who looked directly at it.

"Was it something I did?"

He voice was quiet and he snapped his head up. Her eyes were full of sorrow. It was like all the anger, all the fire had left her, leaving in it's place only sadness, only soot.

"No," he replied.

"Then what is it?"

He felt tears begin to build behind his eyes, the pressure growing. He stood up and she flinched backwards. He left her as he grabbed a glass of water from the kitchen, more for something to do than from thirst. He was hiding from her searching eyes, feeling them pierce his back as he walked away.

He look a long sip and felt her small hand rest on the middle of his back. He took a death breath, put the cup down and felt a few tears escape.

"You got Will back," he said.

"Yes, you helped me," she replied. He could tell she hadn't gotten it yet.

"You got Will back and I didn't get my Sarah back."

He could feel her stiffen.

"It hurts," he said.

"Oh, Hop." She hugged him, her arms barely meeting around his waist. Her face was buried between his shoulder blades and it felt as if she were shaking. A few more tears slid from his eyes and he hung his head. He hugged his body, his arms covering hers and he wondered if the world was going to end again.

After a few moments he disentangled himself from her grasp and walked back into the living room, flopping down on the couch. She followed him, perching beside him on the edge of the couch. She didn't know if she was welcome.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't be."

"I could have said something."

"I should have figured it out."

They sat in silence. The moon was just bright enough to see one another, more shadows than reality but Joyce could tell Hopper was still crying. The tears shone against his cheek.

"I should go," she said, ready to get up.

"Stay," he whispered, as if he hadn't wanted her to hear.

She sat further on the couch, resting her back on the arm rest to look at him properly. He was passed the point of drunk, bordering on totally smashed. His eyes were unfocused and he was slumped in on himself. She rested a hand on his thigh.

He looked at it, an alien on his body. It was so pale, so delicate, something that should never come into contact with him. He wasn't worthy of something so breakable, nor someone as wonderful as Joyce. The loneliness was less punishment than he deserved but the only one he could give himself.

She shuffled over and rested her head on his arm. He wrapped his arms around her small frame and buried his nose in her hair.

"I've missed you," she admitted. He chuckled wetly.

"Some days it felt like I'd torn off a limb." Hopper knew he'd regret saying that in the morning with the harsh light of soberness but for now in the haze of alcohol it seemed the right thing to say.

"You're not alone anymore, Hop. Let me help," Joyce whispered.

He looked at her, eyes wide in earnest. He turned away from the love radiating out of them, burnt from the force of it. What would she understand? She'd never had her child die. He was more alone than ever.

He liked the warmth of her against him, though. And her kids were wonderful and welcoming. She never made him feel as if he were any kind of work or inconvenience. She made him feel wanted. And for the first time in a long while he'd felt something other than emptiness and pain. And it was because of Joyce and her slightly broken family. Maybe she didn't understand but she could empathise. It had almost been her reality, after all. Her heart was bigger than anyone he knew and she'd always made room for him.

Hopper gently kissed her forehead and she smiled at him. He held her tighter, almost drawing her onto his lap. She hugged him back, tight enough for him to feel the squeeze. Her nose was buried in his neck and he could feel her breath against his skin. It was comforting, having her there with him.

"Do you have to go soon?" he asked.

“They boys can do without me for a while if you need me,” she replied.

He nodded and she kissed the skin on his neck, another added layer of comfort. He did need her, more than he'd realised. Maybe he could deal with the hurt, but he couldn't do it without Joyce.